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Kimberley Wattchow
Westminster School



Are There Voices Missing From the Anzac Legend?

Kimberley Wattchow
Westminster School



‘Anzac is not, and never has been one story, and those who have told the Anzac story have done so with many voices...some voices are privileged over others’.¹

The ANZAC legend is our defining legacy from World War One (The Great War 1914–18) in which the Australian psyche of mateship, larrikinism, resilience, courage and sacrifice has become embedded deeply, within our culture. History resonates with the actions of the ANZACs in the Allies’ offensive at Gallipoli, 25 April 1915, and the resounding spirit they displayed on the Western Front battlefields. The ANZAC legend is the collective voice of 416,809 gallant individuals,² many of whom have not been heralded fully, such as the bombers who raided enemy lines; the stretcher-bearers who carried the fallen; the nurses at the advanced dressing-stations. An un-privileged, missing voice from the ANZAC legend is that of the Aboriginal diggers, whose people were decimated by the British colonists in the nineteenth century. Ngarrindjeri Elder Marj Tripp was the first Aboriginal woman to join the Women’s Royal Australian Navy, in 1963. In conversation, she explains that the Aboriginal people wanted to fight for Australia, ‘The country is our land, our mother, and it is important to defend our mother ... the white soldiers were glad to have their knowledge of the land and their use of stealth to startle the enemy with hunter and gatherer techniques.’³ The ANZACs forged our national identity but those of them who were Aboriginal were not enveloped in the defining of Australia’s character as Aboriginal veterans were ‘relegated to inferior and separate status on their return to civilian life’.⁴

Lieutenant Colonel (Rtd) Bill Denny, advocates that the ANZAC spirit is illustrated by the service of Aboriginal people in World War One who ‘had to fight to enlist ... to defend a nation that neither recognised nor respected them, and discriminated against them’.⁵ Barriers such as cultural differences and government legislation meant that some Aboriginal people were compelled to fabricate their ethnicity to enter the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF), as they were not considered to be of ‘substantially European descent’ (Commonwealth Defence Act 1909). Active discrimination saw various Aboriginal men relinquish their heritage and enlist under the guise of Indian or Maori descent. Upon return to Australia, they were ignored and not recognised as beneficiaries of the Returned Servicemen’s Settlement Scheme⁶ where ironically, land from Aboriginal Reserves was allowed for returned white soldiers as compensation for their service. This reflected the Constitution of Australia 1901, wherein Aboriginal people were voiceless; they were not included as Australian citizens.

Conversely, at enlistment some Aboriginal Australians hid their Aboriginality because of the 'Aboriginal Protection Acts' founded in the British Parliament, from 1839, for the Australian colonies. Legally, the first Australians were bound to Aboriginal Reserves with their lives governed by the 'State Protectors of Aborigines'⁷ who were appointed under various jurisdictions to look after their rights, monitor their property and shield them from inequity and injustice. The Protectors' exercised social control of Aboriginal people, including power over their earnings. 'Throughout the First World War ... by claiming that they were not Aborigines, the soldiers hoped to avoid the Protectors' control of their army pay.'⁸ They were active in evading any 'stolen wages' from their entitlement; an occurrence from 1897 until the 1970s.⁹ Arguably, the identity under which Aboriginal people could serve, or chose to serve, in World War One, should be voiced to all Australians as awareness of the steps towards reconciliation.

Australian War Memorial records approximate 400–500 Aboriginal servicemen¹⁰ enlisted in the AIF. Over one third became casualties during the Gallipoli and Western Front campaigns, a rate similar to that of their white soldier mates.¹¹ Nationwide, the sacrifice of the Aboriginal soldiers has not been valued; those who contributed when Australia's identity and character came into being were excluded from the aura, even though they were at the core of the ANZAC legend. Marj Tripp is clear that the protection policies to control the Aboriginal people saw the black diggers '... returned as second-rate citizens the minute they got off the boat.'¹² They were not acclaimed as heroes; they had no citizen status; they were marginalised, with 'strict White control',¹³ to the Aboriginal Reserves where some found their children had been taken forcibly,¹⁴ to mission schools. In the army the colour of a man's skin was of little consequence but after World War One the discrimination gap was wide. Aboriginal people were not permitted to enter a hotel to have a drink with the mates with whom they had served; the ANZAC Day marches honoured white Australians only;¹⁵ and, harsh racial disparity saw the Aboriginal diggers not receive veteran's benefits.¹⁶ They had served Australia in distant places but with no right to vote, their voice was not heard.

The first Aboriginal person awarded the Military Medal was Augustus Farmer,¹⁷ 12 May 1918, great-uncle of Murdoch University Associate Professor Glen Stasiuk. In discussing his documentary 'The Forgotten', which examines the Aboriginal people's contribution to the Australia Armed Forces, Stasiuk posed, 'Do they know about the Aboriginal soldiers ... contributing to the defence of the nation?'¹⁸ His question, to the Aboriginal and wider community, is just, given the constant reminder in our cities and towns with Great War memorials; built to honour the fallen as there was no chance of visiting the places where they died. Peter Cochrane¹⁹ writes of Rose Martyn, an Aboriginal mother, whose son, Charles, was killed in action on 20 September 1917. At the Cross of Sacrifice, Goombungee, Queensland, Rose Martyn stood apart, excluded by grieving white mothers, who offered her no recognition despite their common loss; sons who had given their lives defending Australia. Charles Martyn's war service details include 'Complexion: dark ... Native of Toowoomba'.²⁰ The ANZAC legend began with the white and black diggers, side by side; it is shameful that Aboriginal family members were separated at the memorial services to remember those who fell. The lasting indignity is that isolation within the ANZAC legend has not been voiced widely, and is unknown by many Australians.

The contributions of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians during World War One shaped our country to the world and showed a commitment with which many Australians today, feel proud to be associated. The ANZAC legend echoes national pride, it gives us identity and status but at the home-front the voice of the Aboriginal ANZACs has not been loud over ninety-five years. That voice deserves to be heard so that as a nation, we appreciate the black diggers' involvement in World War One and recognise how their lives, and that of their people, were delineated while the ANZAC legend was growing for white Australians. On ANZAC Day 2010, a 'culturally significant'²¹ war memorial will be dedicated in Adelaide, 'for all Aboriginal people from anywhere',²² there is growing support for Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander participants in ANZAC Day marches (Perth 2001²³ and Redfern 2007²⁴); and, respectful stories of individual Aboriginal ANZACS are being told.²⁵ With reverence, the Aboriginal voice of the ANZAC legend will become privileged, not missing.

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years contemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

Laurence Binyon, 1914²⁶

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